

LINCOLN
IN THE WINTER
OF 1860-61



BY WALLACE McCAMANT

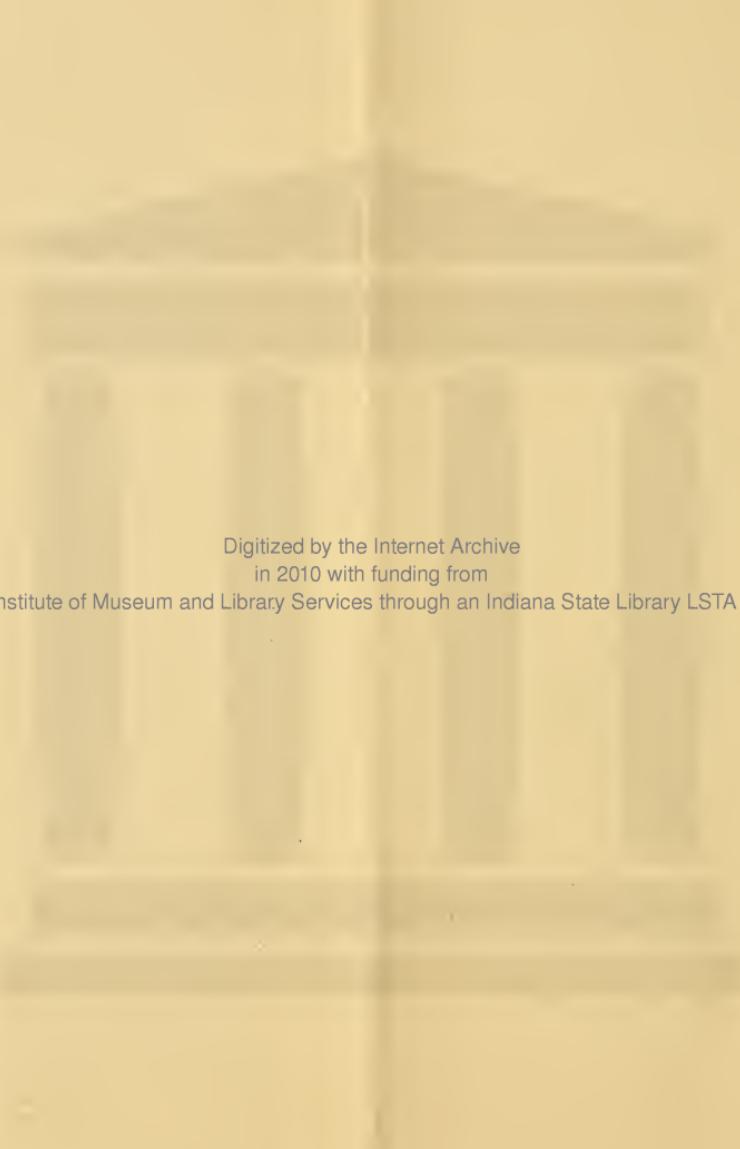


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*An address by Justice Wallace
McCamant of the Supreme
Court of Oregon to the joint
session of the Twenty-ninth
Legislature of Oregon on
February twelfth, nineteen
hundred seventeen*





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Lincoln in the Winter of 1860-61

Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the Legislature, and Fellow Citizens:

I am grateful for the compliment you have paid me in your invitation to be present on this occasion, and especially to you, Mr. President, for your highly flattering introduction. With the many things which are pressing upon you for attention I would not be justified in taking the time necessary to review even superficially the public career of the great man whose birthday we are celebrating. I think we may most profitably expend the time at our disposal by confining ourselves to a single chapter in his life history, the chapter which best illustrates his qualities of head and heart to be emulated by the public men of our day; I refer to the four months intervening between his election and his inauguration as President.

For thirty years prior to 1860 the country had heard threats of secession. Threats oft repeated eventually cease to alarm, and thus it happened that hundreds of thousands of electors voted for Mr. Lincoln in 1860 in the belief that the threats of disunion, which welled up from the South, were pure bluster. These men were speedily disillusioned. The South Carolina legislature was in session when the presidential election was held. Election day in 1860 came on the sixth of November. On the fifth of November, Governor Gist sent a message to the South Carolina legislature, recommending that in the event of Lincoln's election, legislation should be enacted providing for the holding of a convention to consider the wisdom of severing the relations which united South Carolina with the other states. A law to that effect was enacted on the tenth of November. It provided for an election in the several electoral districts of the state on the sixth of December. Such was the unanimity of public sentiment in South Carolina that no Union candidate ran for delegate in any electoral district. The convention was composed unanimously of secessionists. It convened on the seventeenth of December and adopted the ordinance of secession on the twentieth.

By this time it became apparent that the secession movement was tremendously strong in the other cotton states. Mississippi seceded on the ninth of January; Florida and Alabama on the eleventh; Georgia on the nineteenth; Louisiana on the twentieth; and Texas followed on the first of February. These events profoundly influenced the trend of public opinion in the North.

Mr. Lincoln had been elected on a platform which demanded the exclusion of slavery from all the territories. On that platform he had carried all of the Northern states, and in all of these states,

except New Jersey, California and Oregon, Lincoln's vote exceeded the vote of the combined opposition. Notwithstanding this clear expression of the popular will many propositions were brought forward for a compromise of the differences between the sections, and all of these propositions for compromise involved a surrender of the free soil principle. The most notable of them was that proposed by John J. Crittenden, United States Senator from Kentucky. He proposed an amendment to the Federal Constitution recognizing slavery and assuring to it permanently all territory south of latitude 36 deg., 30 min. In his message to Congress on the first Monday of December, 1860, President Buchanan announced that there was no power under the Constitution to compel a sovereign state to remain in the Union against its will.

All over the North public opinion fell into a panic. Boston was the citadel of the anti-slavery movement. A meeting was called in this city by the abolitionists on the third of December, to commemorate the first anniversary of the execution of John Brown. The meeting was stormed by a mob and resolutions were passed denouncing the abolitionists. On the sixteenth of December a meeting was called to denounce the action of the mob. Wendell Phillips spoke at this meeting, but so threatening was the attitude of the public that he required an escort of one hundred policemen in order to reach his home in safety at the conclusion of the meeting. A petition went forth to Congress signed by twenty-two thousand citizens of Boston, praying for such concessions as should accommodate the differences between the sections. Charles Francis Adams and Henry Ward Beecher were swept off their feet. The municipal elections held throughout New England in December went overwhelmingly against the Republican Party.

Similar conditions obtained in the state of New York. By far the most influential Republican paper in the Union was the New York Tribune. On the sixteenth of November it came out with an editorial entitled "Erring Sisters, Depart in Peace." In this editorial Horace Greeley contended that the Southern states should be permitted peaceably to secede. The New York Times, the New York Courier and Inquirer, both of them free soil papers, substantially concurred in the editorial policy of the Tribune. The Albany Evening Journal was the most influential Republican paper in the up-state country and it took the same position. Forty thousand citizens of New York City petitioned for the adoption of the Crittenden compromise or some similar measure. The great financiers of that day, such men as August Belmont, Hamilton Fish and Moses H. Grinnell, were strongly in favor of compromise.

George William Curtis advertised a meeting to be held in Philadelphia on the tenth of December at which he was to speak on "The Policy of Honesty." The condition of public opinion was so threaten-

ing that the owner of the hall canceled the engagement and the meeting was perforce abandoned. On the thirteenth of December, Mr. Henry, the Republican mayor of Philadelphia, presided at a great mass meeting in Independence Square at which resolutions were passed demanding such concessions to the slave states as would avert civil war.

Similar conditions obtained in the West. The Ohio legislature proposed amendments to the Constitution guaranteeing to slavery part of the territories. The Indianapolis Journal was the leading Republican paper of Indiana. A year or two later it was destined to render yeoman service in holding up the hands of President Lincoln. It now advocated the policy of concession or compromise. The Detroit Free Press declared editorially that if an army was sent South to subdue the seceding states it would be met with a fire from the rear which would accelerate its movements.

All in all, the situation was the most ominous and critical which the country had encountered since the winter of Valley Forge. Throughout this terrible winter Mr. Lincoln's head remained cool, his faith firm, and his courage unshaken. On the eleventh of December he wrote Mr. Kellogg, the Illinois member of the Committee of Thirty-three on the crisis, as follows:

"Entertain no proposition for a compromise in regard to the extension of slavery. The instant you do they have us under again; all our labor is lost, and sooner or later must be done over. The tug has to come, and better now than later."

On the thirteenth of December he wrote Elihu B. Washburne, a member of Congress from Illinois, as follows:

"Prevent as far as possible any of our friends from demoralizing themselves and their cause by entertaining propositions for compromise of any sort on slavery extension. * * * On that point hold firm as a chain of steel."

On the fifteenth of December he wrote John A. Gilmer of North Carolina as follows:

"On the territorial question I am inflexible. On that there is a difference between you and us, and it is the only substantial difference. You think that slavery is right and should be extended; we think it is wrong and should be restricted. For this cause neither side has any occasion to be angry with the other."

On the twenty-second of December the New York Tribune announced editorially as follows:

"We are enabled to state in the most positive terms that Mr. Lincoln is utterly opposed to any concession or compromise that shall yield one iota of the position occupied by the Republican Party on the subject of slavery in the territories, and that he stands now as he stood in May last, when he accepted the nomination for the Presidency, square upon the Chicago platform."

On the twenty-third of December an Associated Press dispatch went out from Washington as follows:

"The reported recent declaration of the President-elect, that he will strictly adhere to the Chicago platform, has confirmed the wavering Republicans to that policy, and increased the intensity of Southern feeling."

It is clear that the position of the Republicans in Congress on the Crittenden compromise was controlled by the attitude of the President-elect. All American history demonstrates the prestige and power of the President-elect in the four months intervening between his election and his inauguration. Mr. James Ford Rhodes, in his scholarly history of those times, demonstrates convincingly that if the Republicans had accepted the Crittenden compromise in December it would have been accepted also by the pro-slavery leaders. It was defeated by the refusal of the Republicans to recede from the free soil principle on which they had carried the presidential election. Mr. Rhodes adds that few historical probabilities have better evidence to support them than that which asserts that the acceptance of the Crittenden compromise in December would have prevented the secession of the Southern states other than South Carolina, and would have averted civil war in 1861. It was due to Mr. Lincoln, standing erect and undaunted in this storm of public opinion, that the free soil cause was protected from betrayal by an ignoble compromise.

Mr. Lincoln was not blind to that which other men saw. On the contrary, he knew the people better than any other man of his time. More clearly than anyone else he sensed the present and read the future. He saw that the timidity and irresolution which alarmed other men were but waves on the surface of public opinion, and that beneath them the gulf stream of patriotism was running, deep and strong. He closed his first inaugural with these prophetic words:

"The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

Lincoln was as the young man in the days of Elisha, whose eyes had been touched that he might see the mountain full of fiery horses and chariots of the Lord. In his mind's eye Lincoln saw Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, Thomas and the Grand Army of the Republic, ready to spring to arms when the signal gun should fire on Sumter. If he saw Bull Run and Chancellorsville he also saw Gettysburg and Appomattox, and in the strength of that vision he was brave to stand alone.

Thank God for this brave, virile son of the prairies and for his stout heart in the hour of trial. The country had come to the

parting of the ways. Concession to the slave power had already been carried too far. To carry it further would have been to break the spirit of the North. Phillips and Garrison had spoken; Harriet Beecher Stowe had written; John Brown had died; Andrew, Curtin, Morton and the other great war governors were taking their seats. "God had sounded forth the trumpet which should never call retreat, He was sifting out the hearts of men before His Judgment seat," and if at a time like that the men of the North had faltered they had been as those weighed in the balances and found wanting.

Lincoln found the people divided in political allegiance, differing in their views of slavery and constitutional interpretation, enamored with peace at any price. Yet in this people he evoked a faith which remained firm during four dark years, which was proof against repeated disaster and which bore fruit in billions of treasure and more than two and a half millions of enlistments. At the inception of his career the word "abolitionist" was a term of opprobrium and those who preached the holy gospel of the freedom of man lived in fear of their lives. Lincoln so moulded and led public opinion that the country sustained his emancipation proclamation and it was given him to wipe out the most gigantic evil which ever afflicted the western world. So long as the memory of those times shall endure, the story of his brave, manful life will go ringing down the ages to inspire and uplift, and to vindicate to men now unborn the free institutions of the country he loved and served.

